

On the different translations of "oedipus rex"

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Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex" (lit. "Oedipus the King") has proven to be without a doubt one of the most acclaimed tragedies of all time, having maintained relevance in the literary canon ever since its composition and debut performance around 429 BCE. Like most high-profile works of literature, this Ancient Athenian tale exists no longer as a single playwright's vision, but rather as a multitude of translations, each of which has put its own unique spin on the age-old story that every scholar now knows so well. Among these translations are that of Thomas Gould, J. E. Thomas, and Francis Storr: three apparently similar accounts which, upon a closer line-by-line reading, reveal fascinating nuances in theme and characterization. Such nuances, in turn, reveal each translator's unique take on the original Greek text—and more specifically on the the character of Oedipus, whose moral compass and general disposition have been (and continue to be) interpreted in a number of different ways.

Those familiar with "Oedipus Rex" will recall that much of the play consists of a lengthy dialogue between Oedipus and the blind prophet Tiresias, who is called upon to disclose the murderer of Laius and the source of the plague (which, of course, is Oedipus). The prophet is gracious by nature and initially reluctant to vilify Oedipus, but he soon loses his equanimity to the king's arrogance and delivers the truth. A claim from Oedipus at this juncture, as excerpted from Gould's translation, reads: "I, yes I, Oedipus the ignorant, stopped her [the Sphinx] by using thought, not augury from birds./ ... You—and the plot's concocter [Creon]—will drive out/ pollution to your grief: you look quite old/ or you would be the victim to that plot!" (401-406). Here, Gould's Oedipus adopts an immediate tone of sarcasm through repetition of

the personal pronoun " I" followed by a self-deprecating epithet completely uncharacteristic of the usually-arrogant king. In describing himself as ignorant, he passively criticizes the apparently false wisdom of the seer and perhaps also the false nature of prophecy in general. Such a criticism is especially base given that gods and prophets were held in such high regard among Sophocles' Ancient Athenian audience. The king then furthers his offence toward the prophet by alluding to his own success with the Sphinx, whose riddle he solved with mere " thought" as opposed to augury. His arrogance and disrespect here are again unmistakable to those familiar with Ancient Greek customs, identifying augury as a deeply-respected practice in its era. In the following line of dialogue, he returns to the issue at hand by way of a false accusation toward his uncle/brother-in-law Creon. Gould's word choice here (" plot's concocter") paints Oedipus in a negative-almost paranoid-light, conveying the king's understanding of the prophecy as a premeditated ploy against him and thus establishing a very ironic victim complex. To worsen the reader's impression of the king even further, alongside that victim complex Gould creates an equally negative vindictiveness in the following line when Oedipus exclaims that he would make Tiresias the " victim" were he not so old. This jab at the seer's age concludes the monologue not only with a reinforcement of the protagonist's disrespect but also with a reminder of his own age as contrasted with that of Tiresias; his comparative youth could certainly be equated to the na? vet? and hubris with which Gould intends to portray him.

Thomas' translation constructs a different Oedipus-different enough that a repeated analysis of the previous lines may yield a new take on the

character. Thomas' Oedipus recites, " I, the idiot Oedipus, stopped her, working from intellect, not learning from birds./ ... I think you both—you and the one who framed these things—will regret/ your urge to cleanse the land, but if you/ were not so old, you'd learn now what such words earn" (418-423). This Oedipus appears immediately softer than Gould's and perhaps more likable to readers. He opens with a similarly self-deprecating epithet but excludes the repetition of the pronoun, thus slightly abating the sardonic tone. His recounting of the Sphinx then expresses a familiar arrogance and disrespect toward prophecy but does so in a less undermining manner, and the first words of the following line (" I think") then continue to soften the tragic hero; while they may at first seem insignificant, the verb " think" imparts a critical touch of humility on Thomas' Oedipus, suggesting a degree of uncertainty that subconsciously prompts readers to praise him for his unexpected malleability. For the most part, the remainder of his monologue is fairly straightforward and is void of much of the negative emotion and vengeful passion in Gould's Oedipus. The speech of Thomas' Oedipus is punctuated calmly—lacking any exclamation or interjection—and his descriptions are notably less rash and direct. Creon, for example, becomes not an explicit " concocter" but rather a more ambiguous " one who framed these things," and the king does not wish to make Tiresias a " victim" but rather to bestow upon him the consequence which his " words [have] earn[ed]." The threat here is equally as present as in the last translation, but this idea of " earn[ing]" evokes a sense of justice to mitigate its harshness. The reader, given their prior knowledge of the story, will likely find it difficult

to love any Oedipus but may at least feel a greater sympathy for Thomas' tragic hero than for his translational counterparts.

Storr's Oedipus, though he takes on a life of his own, could certainly be described as a sort of middle ground between the two preceding him. The analogous excerpt from this final translation reads: " I, the simple Oedipus, stopped her mouth by mother wit, untaught of auguries./ ... Methinks that thou and thine abettor soon will rue/ your plot to drive the scapegoat out./ Thank thy grey hairs that thou hast still to learn what chastisement such arrogance deserves" (399-404). This Oedipus opens on a subtler note, choosing a relatively light descriptor (" simple") and still adequately conveying a somewhat sarcastic tone. Arrogance and disrespect proceed as expected with regard to the Sphinx, but now he attributes his success to " mother wit." The theme of motherhood here is a clever incorporation on Storr's part; given that Oedipus' actual mother brings him quite the opposite of success, the irony of his boast may evoke sympathy-or at the very least, a laugh-among readers. Like Thomas' Oedipus, Storr's expresses an admirable bit of uncertainty with his choice of verb (" methinks" being an archaic equivalent of " I think"). He also possesses a trace of the emotion and indignation most present in Gould's translation, asserting that Creon and Tiresias should regret their " plot" (again, indicating premeditation) and likening himself to a " scapegoat." His description of his disputants as " arrogant" is something unique to Storr's translation and concludes the monologue brilliantly, encompassing the almost too ironic nature of everything the tragic hero seems to say and do. He, as the reader can

recognize, is in fact the one hindered by arrogance, and he will likewise be the one to “ learn what chastisement [he] deserves.”

The three differently-translated excerpts above—in addition to the countless other translations of “ Oedipus Rex” yet to be analyzed and compared—each contain a world of new emotion, insight, and humor buried within a paradoxically constant narrative. These worlds elucidate not only the flexibility of language and perception, but also the truly remarkable prerogative of the translator to pour his own unique perspective into his translation.